

By Mark Weiner
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Washington -- Within a bitterly divided Congress, Rep. Richard Hanna has tried to avoid the partisan politics that dominate debate.

So it was no surprise when the first-term Republican from Central New York seized on something he thought Congress could rally around: He proposed a bill to honor federal civilian employees killed in the line of duty by giving an American flag to their families.

But hours before Hanna's Civilian Service Recognition Act was due for a vote, the American Legion raised concerns that the legislation could cheapen the existing flag honor reserved for families of military service members killed in combat. Immediately, a partisan battle erupted.

Influential Republican political blogger Erick Erickson of RedState.com encouraged conservatives to oppose the measure, which he labeled "The Flag for Bureaucrats Act." Erickson wrote that the civilian honor would be "just another trapping of power from the federal government available to all those people in the ever-expanding federal bureaucracy."

Chris Hayes, editor-at-large for The Nation, fired back from the left. He told an MSNBC audience that those who despise government workers "ought to be ashamed of themselves." Hayes called Erickson's comments "a cheap lie."

Through it all, Hanna refused to join the fray. Instead, he took his bill back and worked behind the scenes to build bipartisan support. He met privately with the American Legion's national commander, and clarified that the flag honor was reserved for federal workers killed in terrorist and criminal attacks, or a natural disaster. He asked Democratic and Republican committee staffers to work together and iron out minor changes in the bill's language.

In the end, Hanna's legislation — prompted by a letter he read in The Post-Standard — made it back to the House floor on Nov. 2 with the endorsement of the American Legion and 21 Republican and Democratic co-sponsors. The legislation passed 425-0.

On Dec. 20, Hanna was the only member of Congress that President Barack Obama invited to the White House to watch him sign the bill into law in a private ceremony in the Oval Office.

For Hanna, it was a small victory symbolic of his larger mission and challenge ahead: The moderate Republican has vowed to steer clear of the ideological wars that have produced legislative gridlock. And while many in the GOP move to the right in a nod to tea party influence, Hanna has remained planted firmly in the middle.

"I've learned that if I don't engage in the popular diatribes, then I can focus on things that we can do something about," Hanna says.

Indeed, the 60-year-old, lifelong businessman from the Oneida County village of Barneveld has quickly earned respect from his colleagues as somebody who is willing to get things done in a Congress marked by coarse debate and the lowest public approval rating in its history.

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